
A Samurai's Escapade The Story Of Music, A Katsu Kokichi Autobiography

Musui's Story is the autobiography of Katsu Kokichi, a low-ranking samurai who lived from 1802 to 1850, during the Tokugawa Period. He was from Edo, modern day Tokyo, and spent most his life there, except for excursions across the country. Musui's Story is an interesting and unique historical document for several reasons. First, it is an autobiography which, although they were not unheard of, have only gained popularity in Japan over the last century, under Western influence (Kokichi, XVII). Not only that, but autobiographies, especially before the 20th century, are typically written about spiritual journeys or by those who considered themselves exemplary; the tone of Musui's Story suggests neither of these are true of Katsu Kokichi. However, it is Katsu's behavior and his status in Edo society that makes his autobiography as culturally relevant as it is.

The Tokugawa period was characterized by internal peace, economic growth and political stability. The influence of Neo-Confucianism during the Tokugawa period led to a respect for morals, education and hierarchy. For this reason, there was a strict four class system. First were the samurai, followed by peasants, artisans and merchants. These factors combined made the Tokugawa period a strange time for the Samurai. They were still in the highest ranking social class, however, any real need for them had vanished with the violence. Despite their status, the samurai has lost their predominant source of income and had to turn to new measures. For the most part, they either became a political advisor, joined a personal army, served as a bodyguard or some combination of the three. Katsu Kokichi's story is unique because he did not follow this path, except for occasionally serving as a bodyguard. Instead, he often supplemented his samurai income in seedy, even criminal, ways, such as sword dealing, racketeering, and theft. However, because of the strict social classes, his status within society was largely unaffected by his criminal activities. It is this interesting contradiction that seemingly defines the character of Katsu Kokichi.

Nowhere is this contradiction of character and class more apparent than in the Yoshiwara, the redlight district of Edo that Katsu frequented. Although samurai were discouraged from entering the Yoshiwara, many often did, though probably none more than Katsu Kokichi. In fact, not only was Katsu a regular, but he seems to suggest in Musui's Story that he was one of the most respected people in the Yoshiwara. This is best seen during Katsu's interactions with Toranosuke, an experienced swordsman who was fairly new to Edo. Knowing that he is straight edge and new to the city, Katsu decides he wants to meet Toranosuke and take him on a tour of the Yoshiwara, in order to "shake him up a bit" (Kokichi, 111). From the jump, it is clear that Toranosuke was not impressed the reputation of Katsu, especially when he starts naming Japan's laziest swordsmen in an attempt to insult Katsu (Kokichi, 114). Katsu does not take offense and instead he takes it as a challenge to corrupt Toranosuke. After finding out that Toranosuke does not drink, Katsu coerces him so that they may dine together in the Yoshiwara, despite Toranosuke's objections. Katsu then quickly convinces Toranosuke to smoke and drink sake, although he had earlier claimed he neither smoked nor drank. Immediately after they finish eating, there is a small change in Toranosuke's attitude about the Yoshiwara. Up to this point, he was portrayed as a reluctant guest and unimpressed with the happenings of the Yoshiwara, but when Katsu points out the prostitutes in the street, Toranuke's sighs and says,

“It certainly is a world apart” (Kokichi, 115). At this, Katsu becomes convinced that Toranosuke is impressed with him, although Toranosuke’s actions in the text suggest this might not be the case;

Toranosuke must have been really impressed because I heard from Maturra Kanji... that he (Toranosuke) was telling everyone, “I would never have believed that anyone could away with that kind of behavior in the Yoshiwara. I wonder how he got to be so popular.” (Kokichi, 115-118)

He continues on to suggest that Katsu will never come to harm in the Yoshiwara, that is how respected he is. To me, Toranosuke seems as much awestruck as he does literally impressed. Nothing he says suggests that he actually wants to be like Katsu, only that he was surprised somebody could behave that way in the Yoshiwara.

It is this contradiction that defines Katsu and pushes him forward as one of the most unique figures in Japanese history. In a homogenous culture that strictly enforces social classes and codes, it is rare that someone from the highest class would act so unruly. Katsu is the definition of a bored samurai. Without organized battles to involve himself in, he creates conflict most places he goes. In a sense, the character of Katsu is some sort of bizarre opposite to Robin Hood: a member from the high class who engages in criminal affairs for no particular except enjoyment and personal gain. Strangely, the tone of the writing suggests that Katsu was neither proud nor repentant, and was basically reporting his story.